

ISSUES IN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES  
No. 33, pp. 117-143 (2015)

# THE VIRTUE OF REVERENCE IN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

by

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**Abstract:** One reason scholars and students are attracted to interdisciplinary studies and its research process is because doing good work in the field requires values, traits and skills that are virtuous rather than vicious. This study examines how successful interdisciplinary research is intrinsically related to the human capacity for reverence in the face of complexity. Articulating reverence in the research process advances our understanding of interdisciplinary theories concerning complexity, perspective taking, common ground and integration. The result helps balance the cognitive emphasis in interdisciplinary studies with an account emphasizing emotion and character. Interdisciplinary reverence illuminates the kind of integration practiced in the humanities and fine and performing arts.

**Keywords:** reverence, interdisciplinary theory, virtue, Newell, Woodruff, Repko, humanities

## Introduction

One reason scholars and students are attracted to interdisciplinary studies and its research process is because doing good work in the field requires values, traits and skills that are virtuous rather than vicious. This study examines how successful interdisciplinary research is intrinsically related to the human capacity for reverence in the face of complexity. Articulating

the virtue of reverence in the interdisciplinary research process advances our understanding of interdisciplinary theory concerning complexity, perspective taking, common ground and integration. The result helps balance the cognitive emphasis in interdisciplinary studies with an account emphasizing emotion and character. Interdisciplinary reverence illuminates the kind of integration practiced in the humanities and fine and performing arts.

A consensus definition in interdisciplinary studies today is that interdisciplinary research involves the integration of insights from two or more disciplines for a broader understanding of a complex problem than can be attained by a single discipline (Klein & Newell, 1996; Repko, 2012). A driver for interdisciplinarity is complexity in problems – homelessness in a city, maintaining trust between minorities and police, retention of first generation college students. Each of these issues can be treated by single disciplines. The problem of retention of college students can be handled as a simple economic issue (using the disciplinary perspective of economics, e.g., with concepts of retention costs vs. acquisition costs). This disciplinary approach means there is no expectation of a comprehensive understanding of the complex problem and no need for an interdisciplinary approach. However, in an interdisciplinary approach one is expecting more and is pursuing a complex problem as complex – as a reality larger than any one disciplinary perspective can comprehend – and this can usefully be understood as involving a capacity for reverence. I want to bring out the importance of reverence as a kind of guiding attitude needed for successful interdisciplinary work. Reverence is not all one needs, for the interdisciplinary attitude is multifaceted. But looking at the interdisciplinary research process as an application of the virtue of reverence elucidates central theories, concepts and attitudes regularly discussed by interdisciplinarians.

Reverence is perennially examined by theology and religious studies and celebrated in religious practice. However, it is much broader than the discipline and practice of religion, and this study will not be talking about religious reverence. One can have reverence for an ideal such as freedom, justice, or truth, or for ideal human qualities such as beneficence or wisdom. One can have reverence for artworks, such as Maya Lin's Vietnam Veteran's Memorial or buildings such as the Taj Mahal (Arvidson, 2012). One can have reverence for nature – trees, canyons, storms, a flower. In *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* (2014), philosopher Paul Woodruff draws from the literature of ancient Greece and China to articulate the nature of reverence in everyday life. He states that reverence is “the well-developed

capacity to have the feelings of awe, respect and shame when these are right feelings to have” (2014, p. 6).<sup>1</sup> Any day at any time we can become aware of something larger than ourselves and in doing so feel a kinship with others as being merely human. Reverence is what a successful teacher and student hold in common as seekers of truth, an admission of intellectual limits in the face of a transcendent truth that can never be fully comprehended. Both teacher and student are placed in a benign, respectful hierarchy as they grapple with the truth of the problem. Hubris of either party kills the teaching and learning environment. In a similar way, the interdisciplinarian must maintain an attitude of openness and Socratic wisdom (knowing that one does not know), equitably examining one’s own perspective and others’ perspectives in the face of the complexity of a problem.

It might seem odd to examine how a virtue activates good scholarship, and even stranger that this virtue is reverence. What is a virtue? Summarizing ancient Greek philosophy, Woodruff writes “A virtue is a capacity, cultivated by experience and training, to have emotions that make you feel like doing good things” (2014, p. 56) and “Virtue ethics... deals with strengths people develop in communities” (2014, p. 4). Experience, training, communities – all are essential elements in academic work, specifically in developing disciplinary or interdisciplinary perspectives. The moral component is implicit in the notion of community, which must involve trust, nurturing, mentoring and basic agreements. English professor Anthony Nuttall makes the moral element explicit: “The most obviously moral component in the scholarly ideal...[is] an altruistic reverence for truth, in all its possible minuteness and complexity” (2003, p. 194). When faced with human limitations, such as the feeling one has when encountering a complex problem that seems really important to resolve, there can be a reverence for truth. This reverence is a kind of awe for something beyond our knowledge and a feeling of respect for and trust in each other in trying to figure it out. “If we cannot place a reasonable degree of trust in our scholars, we cannot

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<sup>1</sup> “Some writers use the words ‘reverence’ and ‘respect’ as synonyms, but these words are not synonyms in this book. I need one word for an ideal, ‘reverence,’ and other words for the feelings – respect, awe, and shame – that may or may not serve that ideal. You can never follow an ideal too closely, but you can have too much – or too little – of the feelings to which it gives rise. You are too lavish with awe, for example, if you are in awe of your own wisdom and treat it as sacred. That’s arrogant, and it’s not much better if you feel that way about the accumulated wisdom of your own tradition, for both are human products” (Woodruff, 2014, p. 6).

trust anyone” (Nuttall, 2003, p. 196).<sup>2</sup> To be an interdisciplinary scholar is to feel awe to some extent for what exists beyond one’s knowledge and to respect disciplinary and interdisciplinary peers who approach the same problem seeking clarity. I believe that only in a reverent attitude can one feel the need for interdisciplinary clarity.<sup>3</sup>

## Complexity Theory

William Newell (2001a) put forward “A Theory of Interdisciplinary Studies” as a lead article in this journal which was followed by responses from critics. In Newell’s response to the critics, he writes that as interdisciplinarians “we must be prepared to confront complexity” (2001b, p. 140). Developing the virtue of reverence makes one so prepared. The claim that we must confront and articulate complexity in relation to the interdisciplinary research process has since become a constituent of the definition of interdisciplinary studies (Repko, 2012, pp. 16, 85; Repko, Szostak, & Buchberger, 2014, pp. 28, 127). If a problem is not complex, then it may be difficult to justify an interdisciplinary approach.

In order to justify the interdisciplinary approach, its object of study must be multifaceted, yet its facets must cohere. If it is not multifaceted, then a single-discipline approach will do (since it can be studied adequately from one reductionist perspective). If it is multifaceted but not coherent, then a multi-disciplinary approach will do (since there is no need for integration). To justify both elements of interdisciplinary study—namely that it draws insights from disciplines and that it integrates their insights—its object of study must then be

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<sup>2</sup> Woodruff observes that “The chief limitation on reverence as a virtue is this: it must have an object that is not a slave to human interests, and that is not held to be a mere product of culture” (2014, p. 63). Using the example of unity in an academic context, he describes how a narrow view of unity is distinct from a broad view of unity more adequate to reverence. Woodruff writes, “At the narrow end, defying reverence altogether, would be the mere unity within one warring faction in my department; at the wide end, setting us up for reverence, would be the unity we build around goals of research and education we share with scholars and teachers everywhere. Ultimately, ritual in academic settings expresses reverence for truth. Truth, like unity, is not of our making, even though we have devised our own means for seeking it and expressing what we find” (2014, p. 24).

<sup>3</sup> The section headings below follow the order of Repko, Szostak and Buchberger (2014, pp. 126-135) in the section Theories of Interdisciplinary Studies, namely, complexity theory, perspective taking theory, common ground theory, and integration theory.



represented by a system. Because the connections among the facets will be predominantly nonlinear, the system must be complex. (Newell, 2001a, p. 2)

This passage names two concepts in complexity theory – coherence and system – coherence (of facets) in a complex (non-linear) system. The next passage adds a third concept that refers to our relationship with complexity, namely, *limited* knowledge of the coherent system is all we can attain.

My presumption is that we perceive reality indirectly and thus imperfectly, “through a glass, darkly.” While we cannot describe a portion of reality with certainty, we can tell when we get too far off in our understanding.... My belief is that the interdisciplinary approach offers the least dangerous way to apply partial knowledges to an understanding of the whole. (Newell, 2001b, p. 141)

The three concepts in play here – coherence, complex system, partial knowledge – are relevant to the tie between the reverent attitude and interdisciplinarity.

A complex system by definition is coherent since it is a system. It hangs together. But the full transparency of the coherence, the system as system, is not wholly knowable or predictable (it is non-linear). In the case of the broad model of interdisciplinary research processes articulated by Allen Repko (2012), for example, this means that a complex issue can never be finally resolved. Partial, full, or multiple integrations can be accomplished with various “more comprehensive understandings” aimed at the same complex problem (Repko, 2012, p. 265). But interdisciplinary integration must fall short of the full transparency of system coherence. If the importance of complexity theory is acknowledged, and I think it should be, the interdisciplinary researcher is in an unsettling position. The full transparency of system coherence is an ideal that can never be achieved. Yet this ideal has a role in the interdisciplinary activity.

In response to Stanley Bailis, Newell writes, “By way of contrast, a key integrative insight of interdisciplinary study is that the unity of knowledge is *illusory*. Reality is not homogenous. The world of living phenomena follows additional, different principles than does the world of non-living objects; and the world of humans follows additional, different principles than does the rest of the living world” (2001b, p. 138, emphasis added). He intends to say that bringing the various orders of knowledge together in some identifiable unity is “illusory,” but the logic extends to each of the orders of existence named and any other very broad province of meaning (mathematics, any world of imagination, artistic creation). Fully resolving a complex problem

would involve some sort of unity of knowledge. If the interdisciplinarian cannot fully resolve a complex problem, because by definition it is not fully resolvable and “the unity of knowledge is illusory,” then why try at all?

What is fascinating about confronting complexity is the position of the interdisciplinary researcher in the confrontation. He or she must proceed throughout the research process between two extremes unique to interdisciplinary work. At one end, the researcher must project or imagine an ideal of comprehensiveness – a coherent, transparent complex system that will never be fully revealed. At the other end, the researcher must identify disciplinary findings as limited, that is, acknowledge that insights originating in and bound to disciplines that produced them are only perspectival understandings of the system. Newell is talking about human limitations and how complexity in problems puts one in the position of needing an interdisciplinary approach. It is this position that reverence refers to. Woodruff writes “The principal object of reverence is Something that reminds us of human limitations.” He continues,

A scientist who is reverent toward the truth is reverent in seeking the truth. Her very reverence makes her cautious; it prevents her from saying that she knows exactly what the truth is and keeps her mind open to evidence that should make her adjust her theory. To say that I am reverent toward X ...[implies] that I recognize that X is not entirely under my control, that I think X is what it is no matter what I do or believe, and that I accept a degree of mystery about X which I am trying to penetrate.<sup>4</sup> (Woodruff, 2014, p. 60)

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<sup>4</sup> On requirements for the reverent object, Woodruff writes “Reverence must stand in awe of something – something I will call the object of reverence. What could it be? Something that reminds us of human limitations, if we are to stay true to the concept of reverence with which we began. Therefore you must believe that there is one Something that satisfies at least one of the following conditions: it cannot be changed or controlled by human means, is not fully understood by human experts, was not created by human beings, and is transcendent. Such beliefs are the least you must have in order to be reverent. They do not amount to religion or even to spirituality. For a lover of art, the Something might be a monument of ancient art, since this has passed out of our power to change without destroying. For a reverent scientist, the Something could be the final explanation for the universe, which satisfies the first and third conditions. For a reverent statesperson, the Something might be justice, conceived as an ideal, dimly grasped and much disputed, by which we should try to regulate our poor systems of law. This might satisfy all four conditions. The Something could be nature, or the universe. For many people, the Something will be divine. But if the Something is justice or nature, the reverent person may be an atheist or, as some say, a non-theist” (2014, pp. 113-114).

For interdisciplinarians, the ideal of a fully revealed, coherent complex system is the ever-present horizon of work – an inspirational guide. It will never be realized, hence the felt limits of human knowing required for reverential awe.<sup>5</sup>

In interdisciplinary research, consciousness is in dynamic tension between what is unknowable (the complex problem as a whole) and what is knowable (disciplinary and interdisciplinary insights about the complex problem). This difference is the interdisciplinary edge, and it takes reverence to embrace it. It is a limit in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's sense, presenting both a boundary to human knowledge and a transcendent horizon. Hegel writes, "Limit is the mediation through which something and other each as well *is*, as *is not*....It is in accordance with this difference of something from its limit that the line appears as line only outside its limit, the point; the plane as plane outside the line; the solid as solid only outside its limiting surface" (1969, p. 127). When we assume the interdisciplinary attitude it disturbs our disciplinary attitude and orients us, at least implicitly and marginally, toward a transcendent (ideal) object. Woodruff states that "Unity is an ideal; it is what it is no matter what we think of it or what means we take to achieve it" (2014, p. 23). An integrated product as the goal of interdisciplinary work is a kind of unity. But it always falls short of the ideal unity of the complex system. What an integrative interdisciplinarian accomplishes is a more comprehensive understanding on the non-ideal side of the limit of knowledge. This accomplishment is more than disciplinary insight, hence the "more" in "more comprehensive understanding." But the fully transparent complex system remains a transcendent object. This is the position of reverence – confronting what is beyond us and acknowledging our shared limits to know this something. As those who work from this dynamic middle position, interdisciplinarians are a living personification of common ground.<sup>6</sup>

A word must be said here about why "interdisciplinary humility" is not the same as the virtue of reverence. "Interdisciplinary humility is the awareness that the very complex nature of the problem studied means the best you can

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<sup>5</sup> The interdisciplinary concept of achieving disciplinary adequacy (step 5 of the broad model) relates in obvious ways to admitting limits in knowledge (see Repko, 2012, Chapter 7).

<sup>6</sup> "Instead of removing tensions among disciplinary insights by constructing an overarching, coherent, transdisciplinary framework, the interdisciplinary approach finds its energy in that tension through moderating, but ultimately embracing, the internal contradictions within the complex realities it studies" (Newell, 2001b, p. 138).

strive to achieve is a general or rough understanding of the problem, not a complete or precise one” (Repko, Szostak, & Buchberger, 2014, p. 54; see Newell, 1989). Humility defined in this way obviously coordinates well with what is said in this section about reverence. But “reverence” turns out to be a better name for this capacity, even if we tend to narrow its meaning to religion, and have forgotten about its historic origins and its role in everyday life. The legacy of the word “reverence,” as a virtue in ancient Greece and as Li (reverent ceremony) in Confucian tradition, gives the concept more range and depth than humility. For example, below we will see the role of reverence as a virtue in interdisciplinary character formation, especially looking at Aristotle’s ideas of virtue ethics and community, a discussion that the concept of humility cannot sustain. Also, the common use of the term “humility” is associated with obedience, which is opposed to the idea of reverence I am talking about. In Woodruff’s words,

Reverence is not humility. The opposite of reverence is hubris – which is always a bad thing – but the opposite of humility is pride, and pride can be a good thing. The reverent soul has much to be proud of, and should be proud. Leaders should be proud of their teams and of their missions. Humility smacks of obedience to authority, sometimes even of obsequiousness. But a reverent soul can stand up to authority and is never obsequious. (Woodruff, 2014, p. 61)

Because Repko, Newell, and others do not mean humility to be taken in the sense of obedience, “reverence” is a clearer term for this capacity.<sup>7</sup>

## Perspective Taking Theory

Interdisciplinarity engages in disciplinary perspective taking to multiply the views of the complex problem. For example, tackling the problem of how to deter youth from being lured to terrorist organizations via social media, an investigation of the discipline of psychology might supply a relevant concept of attentional capture. The interdisciplinary research process involves adding more profiles on the problem by adding more insights from psychology and other disciplines or fields. In identifying relevant disciplines and conducting a literature search (steps 3 and 4 of the broad model of the interdisciplinary research process), the researcher may discover that communication studies generates the hyperpersonal model of computer-mediated communication, political science develops the concept of terrorism, and philosophy examines germane moral theories of personal responsibility. These insights and others

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Newell writes, “One consequence of interdisciplinary study is that students learn to question authority” (1989, p. 3).

would need to be analyzed and evaluated (step 6 of the broad model), but the point is they must be generated through a deliberate perspective taking process.

In perspective taking, the interdisciplinarian evaluates disciplinary insights within the context of disciplinary perspective. The assumptions, methods and other elements of the disciplinary perspective of experimental psychology are significant for thinking about the relevance of the insight of attentional capture to the complex problem. The interdisciplinarian looks *at* what the psychologist or political scientist or philosopher looks *through*. Evaluating each insight or theory (step 6) in terms of strengths and weaknesses, and identifying conflicts between insights (step 7), can show how a disciplinary perspective has emphasized a particular side, aspect, or profile of a problem when contributing an insight, thereby producing a skewed understanding of the problem (Repko, 2012, p. 235). This means that perspective taking is not just appreciation. Repko writes “The point to be stressed is that the interdisciplinary mind tends to go beyond mere *appreciation* of other disciplinary perspectives (i.e., multidisciplinary); it *critiques* their capacity to address a problem, or even assess their relevance” (2012, p. 275). Through perspective taking, the disciplinary insight is contextualized within the disciplinary perspective as issuing from it. This contextualization cannot be accomplished from within the disciplinary perspective. The interdisciplinarian looks for what is not usually seen by someone doing disciplinary work. For example, by contextualizing the disciplinary insight the interdisciplinarian can detect theoretical assumptions that limit the power of the disciplinary insights (Repko, 2012, pp. 239-244) to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the problem and can link methodology to data used as evidence (e.g., quantitative data collecting normally omits qualitative data) (pp. 244-251). “[Disciplinarians’] insights are also skewed in the way that they look at what they do see. This is due to the phenomena or the behavior they choose to investigate. Overall their choice of phenomena influences their choice of method, which in turn influences their choice of theory” (Repko, 2012, p. 251).

The interdisciplinary researcher must acknowledge a shared weakness with disciplinarians, a weakness of limited perspective or point of view. This is true whether he or she is working solo or in a team. A reverential respect for shared limited perspectives on the part of the interdisciplinarian means acknowledging that no one interdisciplinary or disciplinary researcher or interdisciplinary or disciplinary perspective can completely address the problem. This reverent attitude is motivation for perspective taking. Why reverential respect? With reverence, the limits of psychology are recognized



but its insights and experts are respected. Without reverence, psychology is seen in a biased way and so its insights (e.g., attentional capture) and experts are easily dismissed or stereotyped, and the discipline is likely to be inadequately researched. No interdisciplinarian can think this way – that is, irreverently – and be successful. Perspective taking involves actively imagining or contemplating the world from another’s viewpoint, and it reduces negative stereotyping of individuals and groups (Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson, & Galinsky, 2011; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). This general statement applies as well to reducing negative stereotyping of the disciplines, their experts, and the insights generated from the disciplines. Nikitina writes

[Interdisciplinarity] involves deeper exploration of the epistemological roots of one’s understanding, critical comparison of different disciplinary methods, and substantive transformation of views as a result. Yet at its cognitive core, it bears resemblance to the best disciplinary work and to dialogic communications, which involve attending to differences and extending a *respectful regard* to clashing views. (2005, p. 403, emphasis added; see Repko 2012, pp. 274-275)

The interdisciplinarian must occupy a position that personally acknowledges his or her own limitations and biases in light of the complex problem and at the same time feel “respectful regard” for all disciplinary approaches to the same problem, even though they are limited. “In practice, appreciation of alternative disciplinary views also means realizing the limits of one’s own monoglossia. Thus, the interdisciplinary dialogue is not just about general receptivity to alternative views. It involves active selection and critical judgment” (Nikitina, 2005, p. 403). Reverential respect must be a part of the interdisciplinary research process because the process demands acknowledging a kind of sameness with regard to truth – namely, that we all must fall short. The disciplinarian is seen to fall short of comprehensive understanding. The interdisciplinarian falls short of a fully revealed coherent complex system.<sup>8</sup>

When one falls short, one lands in some place. Reverence is about position or place, conveyed in ancient Greek tragedies as recognizing you are below

<sup>8</sup> Truth is the ultimate concern for academic reverence and for philosophical epistemology. The epistemology of interdisciplinary work has been described as critical pluralism. “Critical pluralists view multiple and conflicting disciplinary perspectives on a subject as more or less well-reasoned judgments” (Repko, Szostak, & Buchberger, 2014, p.142; see Welch, 2011). Treating other positions known to be incomplete, narrow, and conflictual as well-reasoned judgments involves critique and respect.



the gods and above the beasts. Irreverence is forgetting our humanity. The tragedy is either hubris (Icarus and Oedipus) or becoming bestial (Achilles' revenge towards Hector). In the previous section, we saw how confronting complexity in problems puts the interdisciplinary researcher below divine knowledge (equivalent to a fully revealed coherent system) but above the partial knowledge of disciplines.<sup>9</sup> Since reverence applied to interdisciplinary perspective taking is about respect for each contributing discipline and expert, disciplines and experts are ideally treated the same, equalized, given the same chance to contribute insights in the search for common ground. This means that the interdisciplinary researcher must be self-conscious about his or her own position in the perspective taking process. Especially, the interdisciplinary researcher must assume a benign hierarchy between interdisciplinarity and disciplinarity. It is a hierarchy because the disciplinarian is satisfied with a more narrow or reduced view of the problem, while the interdisciplinarian is trying to achieve a more comprehensive understanding through varying perspectives on the problem, some of those perspectives being a disciplinarian's. It is benign from the point of view of the interdisciplinarian because the interdisciplinarian is respecting disciplines, even if this means pointing out unstated assumptions or other limitations. He or she is respecting disciplines by acknowledging their contributions, their insights into the problem, and considering these insights in the achievement of common ground. Without this reverential respect the perspective taking process will not succeed or even get started.

### Common Ground Theory

In the interdisciplinary research process, common ground is the pivot from disciplinary to interdisciplinary perspective. Common ground theory in interdisciplinary studies is summarized and advanced by Repko (2007). He draws from philosophy, cognitive science, and Newell (1982, 2001a) and Julie Klein (1990), to show that achieving common ground is natural in everyday life and central in integrationist interdisciplinarity. "For Newell and for integrationists generally, integration requires creating common ground. Only then is a truly interdisciplinary outcome possible" (2007, p. 7). Repko writes,

Interdisciplinary common ground is one or more concepts or assumptions through which conflicting insights or theories can be largely reconciled

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<sup>9</sup>I am not suggesting that disciplines and disciplinarians act like beasts. The analogy at this end is about monodisciplinarity as different from interdisciplinarity.

and subsequently integrated, thus enabling collaborative communication between disciplines. Common ground is not the same as integration, but is integral to the process of integration. The creation of common ground is a necessary but not sufficient condition for integration. (2012, p. 322)

A bridge metaphor is often used for common ground since the bridge is defined by the places it connects, in this case conflicting disciplinary insights and an integrated, more comprehensive understanding (Repko, 2012, p. 322). It grounds the insights and leads to a more comprehensive understanding without being a dwelling place itself, much like a bridge is a means not an end. Said another way, common ground is more like a context that surrounds conflicting insights than a vector between them (Arvidson, 2014).

Common ground is necessary if there is to be resolution of some kind of conflict. In the interdisciplinary research process, interpreting conflicting insights as possible contributors to integration can be seen as an application of the virtue of reverence. Repko makes use of a marriage counselor analogy to discuss common ground, especially pointing out how the interdisciplinarian is like a counselor in getting *behind* the conflicts to find common ground (2012, p. 332). The analogy works well in discussing reverence, but the emphasis changes to what is *in front of* the stakeholders, the object they confront. Reverence involves a reorientation toward something transcendent. In the marriage counselor analogy, suppose Pat and Kendall disagree sharply about how to handle the family finances, and the disagreement threatens to break the marriage. Each is a stakeholder owning a unique perspective, and the counselor might help them find common ground if attention can be directed to something larger than each of them. Let us assume this something larger is complex, dynamic, and a thing that neither one of them completely owns or controls and neither created on their own. If Pat and Kendall are successful in achieving common ground it will take reverence to do so – a feeling that there is a significant something larger than their own point of view, namely, an ideal of unity imperfectly manifested in their marriage (cf. Woodruff, 2014, pp. 39-40). Rather than nonstop conflict, the aim of both is toward an ideal unity manifested daily (or not) in the rituals, trust, mutual respect, ceremonies, and sanctity of the marriage.<sup>10</sup> This ideal unity is the guiding inspiration of the counselor as well, from his or her own perspective. If sessions are successful, all three will have

<sup>10</sup> A particular person may not be an object of reverence, according to Woodruff, but the ideal or possibility of a moral quality in general (e.g., beneficence, love, caring) that the person represents in his or her action can be an object of reverence (Woodruff, 2014, p. 176).

exercised their capacity for reverence. In depersonalizing and simplifying the analogy to extend it to the case of interdisciplinarity, Pat represents insight “p” from discipline P and Kendall insight “k” from discipline K. The counselor is the interdisciplinary researcher. Achieving common ground in light of reverential awe and respect involves redirecting insights “p” and “k” from mere conflict with each other to a future something larger than each, an integration from common ground. The interdisciplinarian is a kind of counselor or creative negotiator who makes this happen.

Practitioners, theoreticians and instructors in integrative interdisciplinary studies seem to agree that achieving common ground in interdisciplinary work is difficult. Yet there are reasons to believe it can become less difficult with practice, especially when interdisciplinary researchers remember to practice a reverential attitude. Successful instructors in interdisciplinary methods courses recognize that teaching students to execute some version of the broad model of the interdisciplinary research process is as much about practicing a new attitude towards or feeling about knowledge as it is about “steps.” Woodruff discusses the example of a conversation with “Janice” who refuses to vote, saying “My vote won’t make a difference” and “Nothing will ever change.” After a number of arguments about morality, duty, and voting for her passion on certain issues, it turns out that no amount of argument can persuade Janice to vote. “That feeling [for the value of the ceremony of voting] comes from reverence, but there is no argument for a feeling. Or for any other virtue as a source of feelings. You must grow up with it in order to appreciate it” (Woodruff, 2014, p. 17). The point is that the more you practice the more likely you are to see common ground where others may see only conflict. In the same way that Woodruff argues that reverence has been forgotten or narrowly relegated to religious contexts, Repko observes that we have forgotten how natural pursuit of common ground is.

Achieving common ground, and indeed the whole interdisciplinary research process, requires that we engage in unconventional thinking about how to approach problems and their solutions. In this connection, it is worth contrasting our *natural* thinking process with our *learned* thinking process. While unconventional thinking may seem challenging, in reality we are naturally able to pursue common ground but are commonly educated not to do so. (Repko, 2012, p. 324)

He goes on to say on that we learn to think non-integratively in disciplinary categories, in terms of right or wrong, and for or against. So in order to think inclusively rather than exclusively we have to go against the conventions

of our education (p. 325). One role of reverence as a component of the interdisciplinary attitude is to make this achievement of common ground more ordinary and less extraordinary. Remembering to be reverent is difficult, but the nature of virtues is that the more you practice them the more they become a natural part of who you are. Hence virtue ethics is often called character ethics. Looking at the achievement of interdisciplinary common ground in the light of the virtue of reverence reveals the significant point that achieving common ground is facilitated by practicing reverence – reverent awe for complex problems and reverent respect for disciplines and disciplinarians, whose insights may be integrated to allow for fuller understanding and better handling of the problems.

## Integration Theory

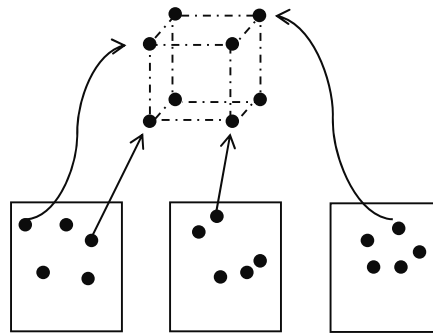
One goal of the interdisciplinary research process is integration. Disciplinary insights are integrated, not disciplines or whole disciplinary perspectives. Disciplinary insights must be taken in a very broad sense as any findings produced by experts in the discipline or assumed in knowledge production.<sup>11</sup> An insight could be a concept, theory, method, assumption, metaphor, model, process, narrative, question, policy, plan, or program. This non-exhaustive list applies to both disciplinary and interdisciplinary insights.<sup>12</sup> Repko writes, “Interdisciplinary integration is the cognitive process of critically evaluating disciplinary insights and creating common ground among them to construct a more comprehensive understanding. The understanding is the product or result of the integrative process” (2014, p. 133; 2012, p. 263). Interdisciplinary work integrates from disciplinary work, and the “new thing” produced is not reducible to any one discipline that

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<sup>11</sup> Even wider sources of insights are possible from non-academic arenas, such as government agencies, industry, not-for-profits (Repko, 2012, p. 281).

<sup>12</sup> The list is compiled from Repko (2012, pp. 426-435) where he discusses interdisciplinary products, but it seems the list of types for disciplinary and interdisciplinary insights would be similar. I believe interdisciplinary studies needs to define “insight” and “disciplinary insight” more adequately since they are at the center of its standard definition. I am not trying to do that here. For a general definition of “insight,” Repko provides “A scholarly contribution to the clear understanding of a problem based on research” (2012, p. 466).

provided constituent insights. Figure 1 depicts this tie between disciplinary insights and integration.



**Figure 1. Disciplines contribute insights (dots) to the integrated product (cube). The 3-D cube represents a more comprehensive understanding.**

**Note: common ground is necessary but not represented in this illustration.**

Suppose the complex problem is urban homelessness in a particular city and the contributing disciplines are psychology, economics, and philosophy. Through the literature review process (step 4 of the broad model), each discipline may be found to have relevant insights, a few of which contribute as constituents to the larger picture, the cube. The cube is the integrated product not reducible to any one insight or discipline.

## Integration, Interdisciplinary Studies, and Moral Virtue

Virtues are about action or behavior. We saw this in the definition of virtue at the beginning of this study: “A virtue is a capacity, cultivated by experience and training, to have emotions that make you feel like doing good things” (Woodruff, 2014, p. 56). The task in this section is to show more broadly the virtuous character of interdisciplinary activity.<sup>13</sup> In what follows, I will parse the classic definition of virtue from Aristotle to form paragraph headings so it can be applied to the case of the interdisciplinary research process, including integration. Aristotle’s definition of virtue in Book II, Ch. 6 of *The Nichomachean Ethics* is,

<sup>13</sup> Since integration is the defining characteristic of interdisciplinary studies, I will emphasize the interdisciplinary research process itself in this section, at times explicitly referring to integration. I will also discuss moral virtue more generally, at times explicitly referring to reverence.



%<sup>80</sup><sub>00</sub> Virtue is a state of character  
 %<sup>80</sup><sub>00</sub> concerned with choice  
 %<sup>80</sup><sub>00</sub> lying in a mean, i.e., the mean relative to us, this being determined  
 by reason,  
 %<sup>80</sup><sub>00</sub> and by that principle by which a man of practical wisdom would  
 determine it. (2009, p. 31)<sup>14</sup>

*Virtue is a state of character.* Virtue is a relatively permanent disposition to do good in a variety of situations developed through moral training. It is a capacity or readiness to do the right thing in a situation that calls for it. Interdisciplinary studies also involves the development of guiding values and positive capacities, characteristics, or traits. Repko writes, “Interdisciplinary studies is a systematic method of training one’s mind and developing one’s character” (2012, p. 58). Qualities or values of the interdisciplinary attitude include “empathy, ethical consciousness, humility, appreciation of diversity, tolerance of ambiguity, and civic engagement” (Repko, Szostak, & Buchberger, 2014, pp. 53-55). If developing and exercising these values are associated with successful interdisciplinary work, and if successful interdisciplinary work aims at integration, then developing and exercising these values are associated with integration. *Civic engagement* is a foundational value on the list since it is the meaningful background or implicit context for any virtue. The ideal of the ancient Greek philosophers is that moral virtue is excellent activity in an excellent community in which the welfare of the whole is more important than that of an individual citizen and community engagement is a duty. Complex problems needing interdisciplinary attention are frequently social issues for which successful resolution of any sort will affect the quality of life for members in a community. Even if an interdisciplinary study is more narrowly focused for a small audience, it is usually true that peers, editors, other readers, and the researchers themselves expect or hope that the study will make a difference in human living more generally.<sup>15</sup> In undergraduate interdisciplinary (or integrative) studies some type of service learning or community engagement is often required to enhance perspective-taking abilities and help develop the value of civic engagement and the other values listed above (Repko, Szostak, & Buchberger, 2014, pp. 59-60). Virtuous character, especially as exercised in civic or community engagement, seems to be a natural part of

<sup>14</sup> The Greek word for virtue is *arête*, also translated as excellence.

<sup>15</sup> For example, as a referee for interdisciplinary books and journals, I ask of the author “What is the larger significance of this claim?” or similar questions that I myself have been (rightly) asked as author over the years. On narrow vs. wide integration see Repko (2012, pp. 286, 331).



interdisciplinary studies.

Other values on the list – empathy, ethical consciousness, appreciation for diversity, tolerance of ambiguity – are meaningful within this context of community or civic engagement.<sup>16</sup> *Empathy* “is an outcome of perspective taking” (Repko, Szostak, & Buchberger, 2014, p. 53), and above we have seen the connection between perspective taking and reverence. *Ethical consciousness* is linked to disciplinary and personal bias (p. 53). Interpreted etymologically, this makes sense. Ethics is from the Greek *ethos*, which originally meant custom, habit, or habitat. We each have a moral habitat, an upbringing and development in which we form our habits of thinking and acting (our habitat includes parents, friends, demographic and social communities, etc.). In this sense, ethical consciousness is a kind of self-consciousness of bias and habits in interdisciplinary work. *Appreciation for diversity* means “having respect for people because of our common humanity” (p. 54), exactly the idea of reverential respect Woodruff describes. “Reverence is a shared devotion to high ideals. Respect – the respect that flows from reverence – requires that we recognize each other’s devotion to those ideals” (Woodruff, 2014, p. 189). *Tolerance of ambiguity* is linked directly to reverence and complexity theory as discussed above. “Becoming interdisciplinary means accepting that understanding any complex problem is an ongoing process, and that complete understanding of it is elusive” (Repko, Szostak, & Buchberger, 2014, p. 55).

*Virtue is concerned with choice.* We deliberate about things we can voluntarily choose (Aristotle, 2009, Book III).<sup>17</sup> It is easy to forget that interdisciplinary research, often presented as steps in a process, is really a lively decision-making affair (Newell, 2007). The steps are dynamic decision centers. The researcher at each step is put into the position of free choice through deliberation. As a decision-making process, interdisciplinary research is heuristic, iterative, and reflexive (Repko, 2012, p. 69). It is heuristic since the steps are “decision points”; it is iterative since steps are “procedurally repetitive”; it is reflexive since it involves “self-awareness” (pp. 70-71). These three characteristics coordinate well with choice in virtuous activity. In terms of the heuristic qualities of the process, at the decision centers the researcher bears a responsibility to act from a virtuous

<sup>16</sup> For the discussion of humility, see the section above on complexity theory, last paragraph.

<sup>17</sup> When discussing choice or decision-making, Aristotle emphasizes personal and community responsibility. This is noteworthy for points made in this section about emulating or modeling oneself after others because if a person is of good (or bad) character both the person and the community are responsible for this outcome.

state of character, including reverence and the values listed above. Acting virtuously pre-empts such things as favoring disciplines or skewing results. As for the iterative qualities of the process, it is “procedurally repetitive” in the same way that virtues are gained by acting virtuously. You become reverent “By doing reverent things, just as you become courageous by doing courageous things, or fair-minded by doing what is fair” (Woodruff, 2014, p. 68). In terms of the quality of reflexivity, the research process involves “self-awareness” in ways already described, for example, how the interdisciplinarian may feel a kind of unique placement when confronting complexity, considering various perspectives, and creating common ground. Developing virtues works the same way: “You need to know where your actions and emotions are coming from before you can know yourself well enough to cultivate a virtue. This is one reason why the ancient Greeks cared so much about the command they believed issued from Apollo – ‘Know thyself’” (Woodruff, 2014, p. 69). The interdisciplinary process calls for the researcher to develop interdisciplinary integrity – a consistency of attitude in applying interdisciplinary theories and values in achieving integration.

*Virtue is committing to choosing the mean, i.e., the mean relative to us, this being determined by reason.* For Aristotle, choosing the mean is synonymous with choosing virtuous activity. In a situation that calls for the right amount of fear (a mean), too much fear is cowardice (a vice) and too little fear is rashness (a vice). The mean choice in the situation is courage (a virtue), a mean since it is neither an excessive or deficient choice. Choosing the mean in a particular situation, such as running into a burning building to save others, is the sense of “mean” that most are familiar with.<sup>18</sup> Philosophers would also note a second, more fundamental sense of “mean” in Aristotle’s ethics: the mean of character formed through moral training. Over a lifetime, the practice of excellent activity yields the capacity to make better, more virtuous choices in particular situations. The full sense of “choice” – the Greek word is *prohairesis* – conveys not just choice but personal commitment, a choice of who I am before (*pro-*) this particular choice in this particular situation (Chamberlain, 1984).<sup>19</sup> The embodiment of

<sup>18</sup> Such an action may not be called for in a particular “burning building” situation, i.e., it might be rash not virtuous.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Chamberlain, a classicist striving to disambiguate translations of *prohairesis*, writes, “What we need now is a name for the process by which the orders of reason are brought upon desire so as to change it. My contention is that this is what Aristotle means by *prohairesis* and that failure to recognize the fact that *prohairesis* is a process has given rise to the various translations mentioned earlier” (1984, p. 151); “Because commitment covers nearly the same ground as does Aristotle’s use

virtuous activity over a lifetime, committing to the mean of character, is also called integrity.<sup>20</sup> One who has a well-formed character mean will be more likely to choose the mean in a particular situation.

To become better at the interdisciplinary research process involves practice just like anything else, and this means practicing the virtue of reverence as seen in previous sections. One changes in doing the work, both cognitively and in personal character. Keeping in mind Aristotle's more important sense of mean, the mean in character, I take this change to be a development of character involving a commitment to the interdisciplinary attitude. When undergraduates find a home in interdisciplinary or integrative studies programs, this choice no doubt contributes to personal identity. But it is not necessarily a significant commitment to the ideals and virtues of interdisciplinarity though it could become that. For example, in a methods course, students can learn the interdisciplinary research process and succeed in establishing common ground and in many cases predict what integration would look like, if not accomplish it. What perhaps is less frequently observed, especially in the space of just a term or two of such courses that explicitly teach the broad model of interdisciplinary research, is a significant change in character, a personal commitment to the values of interdisciplinarity. Graduate students and professional practitioners might naturally experience this character development through practice, emulating others, and reflection – integrating the interdisciplinary attitude into professional work and personal character. Interdisciplinary practitioners must deliberate (reason) well at the steps or decision centers in order to choose which disciplines to include, which insights to include or not, and so on. But through practice, in the longer run, being interdisciplinary can involve a certain kind of moral character that enhances the work. Donning the interdisciplinary attitude for a specific complex problem at least implies an interdisciplinary and personal commitment to certain values of moral

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of *prohairesis*, it will function as a more consistent translation" (p. 155).

<sup>20</sup> Virtuous action is appropriate or "mean" behavior, not necessarily moderate. For example, showing anger towards one who causes harm or mocking an arrogant leader could be appropriate behavior in a situation that calls for it. Woodruff writes that reverence is compatible with mockery, especially when leaders are irreverent: "It does not put down mockery or protect pompous fools. And most important, it cherishes freedom of inquiry. Reverence sets a higher value on the truth than on any human product that is supposed to have captured the truth" (2014, p. 34). Reverent mockery attempts to remind the target of a kind of shared ignorance about what is beyond human knowledge; it attempts to bring down the pompous fool by requiring acknowledgement of human limits, especially one's own (Arvidson, 2012).

character, especially reverence. Interdisciplinary studies is a cognitive endeavor, but it is also about moral training.

*Virtue is determined by that principle by which a person of practical wisdom would determine it.* Virtuous behavior is gained through training, especially by following the model of virtuous community members. To the question “How can I become more reverent?” Woodruff responds, “By looking to see what you are already doing that is reverent, and doing more things that are like that” (2014, p. 69). One can also look to reverent leaders and emulate them; for example, reverent teachers can be a model for how students might also be reverent in a classroom (and teachers can be reminded by students’ virtuous behavior to practice reverence) (p. 216). How can I become more interdisciplinary? In addition to becoming more reverent, as argued above, one becomes more interdisciplinary by following the model of outstanding members of the interdisciplinary community. Following the model of interdisciplinary leaders accords with the larger context of Aristotle’s definition of virtue as excellent activity in an excellent community and makes sense at any level, from undergraduates to professional scholars. The virtuous ideal is a community in which the leaders are worthy of graceful emulation.<sup>21</sup> The ideal community of interdisciplinarians, following Aristotle’s idea of virtue ethics, accomplishes interdisciplinary integrations for the sake of serving the larger community. Repko makes a similar request of the current interdisciplinary community – “We need to move beyond debate between disciplinary theories to discussion and critical evaluation of more comprehensive understandings produced through interdisciplinary

<sup>21</sup> The virtue of reverence is more about politics than about organized religion (Woodruff, 2014, p. 2). As political, it is about power and weakness in a community. For the individual, this means knowing where I fit in the hierarchy of those with power over me and those whom I have power over. An implicit or explicit agreement about our place or location is reverent respect, and it is reinforced through ceremony (Woodruff, 2014, pp. 186-190). Ceremony is a meaningful custom or genuinely enacted ritual that brings a community of persons together under a transcendent something or ideal they all share. The ceremony allows participants in a social structure to know and accept their place in that structure. It could be a ceremony in a hierarchical organization, such as a respectful exchange of salutes between sergeant and private, standing when a judge enters a courtroom, or the ritualistic introduction of a main speaker at an academic conference. It could be ceremony between friends, such as embracing at a funeral or removing shoes when entering a friend’s home. All of these gestures can be done without reverence and can therefore be empty ritual, but empty ritual does not express and reinforce community feeling. Reverent ceremony is a key part of leadership, since it engenders a togetherness that benignly acknowledges differences in power.

integration (especially when they form the basis for public policy)” (2012, p. 273). Such interdisciplinary community engagement is based on interdisciplinary integration (p. 272).

One way to look at teaching the broad model of the interdisciplinary research process to undergraduates is that we are teaching them to be members of a reverent community, a community that acknowledges its human limitations in confronting a complex problem that no one person or discipline created or controls. But there is a difference between students and interdisciplinary leaders (e.g., instructors, professional scholars, and association board members). In addition to moral virtue, which we have been discussing throughout, interdisciplinary leaders must have intellectual virtue. Only in the tenth and final “book” of his *Nichomachean Ethics* does Aristotle make a further distinction about ethics that seems very important. In book X, he briefly distinguishes moral virtue from intellectual virtue – *theoria* in Greek – which can be translated as contemplation (2009, Book X, Ch. 7). *Theoria* is roughly equivalent to reflection in the discipline of philosophy: detached, attentive pondering of universals or essences. Unlike moral virtue, intellectual virtue is not directed toward a practical goal. Our students do not need to be able to contemplate and professionally explain how they accomplish what they accomplish, though such is an admirable goal on the part of the instructor. But our leaders must have this ability. This is step two of the broad model – justify an interdisciplinary approach – which really is a persistent community concern of practitioners and practitioner/leaders.

## Concluding Remarks

After summarizing, I will conclude by suggesting a role for reverence in the unique case of interdisciplinary humanities.

Successful interdisciplinary research is intrinsically related to the human capacity for reverence in the face of complexity. To be an interdisciplinary scholar is to feel to some extent a reverent awe for what exists beyond one’s knowledge and to simultaneously feel reverent respect for disciplinary and interdisciplinary peers who approach the same problem seeking clarity. Virtue is about having the right emotions or feelings that the situation calls for, and an examination of the virtue of reverence in interdisciplinary studies helps provide balance to the discussions of cognition that dominate interdisciplinary literature. Newell observes, “It strikes me that the role of emotion in interdisciplinary integration...deserves more attention” (Repko,



Newell, & Szostak, 2012, p. 301). To that end, this study has discussed how reverence is inherent in interdisciplinary theories of complexity, perspective taking, common ground, and integration. In complexity theory, it takes reverence to embrace the tension between what is unknowable (the complex problem as a whole) and what is knowable (disciplinary and interdisciplinary insights about the complex problem). In perspective taking theory, a reverent attitude is motivation since the research process demands acknowledging a kind of sameness with regard to truth – namely, that we all must fall short. An equalized playing field energizes the need to seek new perspectives. The disciplinarian falls short of comprehensive understanding, so, in seeking such understanding, the interdisciplinarian must consider each possibly relevant disciplinary perspective in an open-minded way. Nonetheless, the interdisciplinarian will fall short of a fully revealed coherent complex system. In common ground theory, interpreting conflicting insights as possible contributors to integration is a way of practicing the virtue of reverence. Achieving common ground involves redirecting conflicting insights to a future Something beyond the conflict, a ground they hold in common from which integration and a more comprehensive understanding can be accomplished. In integration theory, reverence supports developing and exercising the values called for in achieving integration. Specifically, the interdisciplinary process calls for the researcher to develop interdisciplinary integrity – a consistency of attitude in applying interdisciplinary theories and values in achieving integration. The process of interdisciplinary studies is cognitive practice *and* moral training. Teaching undergraduates the interdisciplinary research process is also inviting them to be reverent members of a community. More generally, one way a person becomes more interdisciplinary is by following the model of outstanding members of the interdisciplinary community. Leaders must especially become excellent in modeling for others a core community concern with justifying an interdisciplinary approach.

Here, I believe a sketch of how reverence is active in interdisciplinary humanities can add important insights about the humanities and interdisciplinary integration. In the conclusion of *Case Studies in Interdisciplinary Research*, Newell observes that Mieke Bal's chapter was very different from the others. Coming out of the humanities and performing arts, "She resisted the drive for a single best integration of disciplinary insights, preferring instead to lay out the range of possibilities for integration." Newell continues,

Full integration is seldom wished for in the fine and performing arts, and by extension in the humanities disciplines wishing to respect the



deliberate ambiguity inherent in the art objects they critically examine. Rather, the art object/text sets up integration and (usually implicitly) offers prompts that suggest some starting points for viewers to engage in integration themselves. Whereas interdisciplinarians in the natural and social sciences seek to integrate on behalf of others, presenting their new, more comprehensive understanding as a finished product, the fine and performing arts and the humanities studying them (and other aesthetic texts) seek to draw others (audiences, viewers, readers) into the integrative process and encourage them to *participate in a shared integrative process*. (Repko, Newell, & Szostak, 2012, p. 301; emphasis added)

Sharing is characteristic of all work towards interdisciplinary integration. An essential point of the discussion of reverence in this article is that the experience of reverential awe in the face of complexity places or re-places us in a shared situation with others. In particular, we share an awareness of a necessarily limited perspective about the Something we are oriented towards. When a scholar takes an interdisciplinary humanities approach, this activity is also an invitation to others (audiences, viewers, readers) to enter this shared space of reverential awe and respect.<sup>22</sup> An interdisciplinarian drawing primarily from non-humanities disciplines also asks others to share in the integrative result, but in the humanities the making of interdisciplinary integration is designed to be participatory, as Newell observes, not just shared. Scholars working in interdisciplinary teams must be more explicitly participatory in producing integration than a solo interdisciplinarian. But in the humanities the individualistic engagement is distinctive and more intense – the author, scholar, or critic means to “call out” the audience. The work in the interdisciplinary humanities demands a response, a personal responsibility for a personal response.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Immanuel Kant argues for a fundamental, pre-supposed “universal voice” (p. 50) or “common sense” (pp. 74-75) in which aesthetic experience is announced as universally valid for all other rational beings (shared essentially), even though each individual may have a distinct interest in the aesthetic object (Kant, 1951).

<sup>23</sup> One reviewer asks what we might mean by “audience” in interdisciplinary humanities work. When a scholar critiques a play, art object, or other product of the arts, the audience is clearly the reader of the critique. What is not clear, I think, is how there is an invitation for an audience of the artwork itself to participate in integration. I do not know that anyone has discussed this unmediated experience of the artwork as interdisciplinary. It might be the case that an art object (e.g., painting, sculpture, song) or event (e.g., play, poetry reading) can be designed to call for interdisciplinary integrative participation, a peculiar aesthetic experience on the part of the audience of the piece. The question now becomes whether the direct experience of this art object is exclusively a matter of aesthetic experience, or if it is or can be a version of interdisci-

If the interdisciplinary humanities scholar is aiming at sharing integration with the audience through prompts or starting points, such as multiple redefinitions of a key term in a graffito (Bal, 2012), then what can we say about the kind of integration produced? In his work on complexity theory, Newell notes,

Authors, painters, and performers make sense of their unique location within a complex system by expressing its meaning to them[selves] in their work. Scholars attempting to interpret or critique their work identify the influences to which it responds. The significance of such influences has long been recognized in the traditional (disciplinary) humanities and fine and performing arts. What complex systems theory contributes to our interdisciplinary understanding of these influences is that they form an overall pattern that promotes unique behaviors at each location within the system. Thus, an interdisciplinary interpretation of a text must reach beyond separate influences to an appreciation of the overall behavioral *pattern* of the system. And it must recognize the systemic as well as the individualistic sources of uniqueness in author and text. (Newell, 2001a, p. 11, emphasis added)

I take the “overall behavioral pattern of the system” to be the theme or narrative in the work. This theme is dynamic and widely interpretable in any era by any reader, audience, or scholar. Will we ever know the full meaning of the Paleolithic sculpture “Venus” of Willendorf?

Echoing Newell, I would speculate that the idea of integration in interdisciplinary humanities is most directly related to place and placement (Newell, 2001a, pp. 10-11). In reverent awe, the person feels limited in what he or she can know, placed “below the gods.” This makes sense, because we are humans not gods, though we forget our place.<sup>24</sup> Reverence is a remembering of where we are – with others – in reverential respect. Newell writes,

It is common practice in the humanities and arts to place a text, or author, or work of art into context, to understand it in part through an examination of its historical, geographical, intellectual, or artistic

iplinary humanities within interdisciplinary studies. If the latter, it must be admitted that there can be interdisciplinary art objects whose aim or effect is to engage the audience in the interdisciplinary attitude with all that this entails (including confronting complexity, considering variation of disciplinary perspectives, seeking common ground, and achieving integration, as well as reverence and the other values discussed above).

<sup>24</sup> One aim of artistic reverence can be to remind tyrannical leaders that they are merely human, that they are fellow imperfect members of the human community (Arvidson, 2012). And reverent artists and artworks do this effectively through reverent mockery, “awakening a sense of shame in people who have allowed theirs to lie dormant” (Woodruff, 2014, p. 67).

location....The widespread practice of contextualization could be better understood and carried out if scholars and artists were to visualize themselves as looking for the distinctive features of a particular *location* within a complex system. (2001a, p. 4, emphasis added)

As I understand it, what Newell is suggesting is that for the interdisciplinary-minded in the humanities, the theme or narrative is created as a tension between the audience as perceiver of the artwork and the creator, a tension intimated by the work itself and interpreted by the humanities scholar.<sup>25</sup> This theme is patterned but not determined, systematic but nonlinear. Above all, work in the interdisciplinary humanities that critiques artworks, literature, or other aesthetic objects invites the reader to take a place with respect to integration – it is participatory. Woodruff writes “Reverence calls us to be conscious of bare humanity, the humanity of our species” (2014, p. 80). This call of reverence aligns with the summons of influential creative activity and its interpretation and critique. The summons is an invitation to participate, to join, to take a place with fellow humans – hence the humanities.

**Acknowledgements:** I thank two anonymous reviewers and the editors for helpful comments and encouragement. This work was supported by a Seattle University, College of Arts and Sciences Summer Research Fellowship.

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<sup>25</sup> Mieke Bal, a cultural theorist, critic, and artist, notes how a tension between the essential meaning of the object and the meaning for the individual can pre-empt integration as a finished product. “Both the respect due to the objects and the need to analyze critically if and how they serve the people they address in the most adequate way are two requirements potentially in tension with each other. Tension, therefore, is indispensable, and sometimes overrules the wished-for integration. Here lies in my view the specific contribution of the humanities for our reflection of how to do interdisciplinary research” (2012, p. 92).

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